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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the gap in literature related to community college honors programs by investigating the incidence of these programs within a random, national sample of 163 community colleges. In particular, the study examines relationships between the presence of honors programs and institutional characteristics (e.g., size), curricular characteristics (e.g., emphasis on transfer and remedial courses), and student body characteristics (e.g., the proportion of minority groups). Three primary concerns addressed are: (1) what proportion of community colleges offer honors programs; (2) how community colleges structure access to their honors programs; and (3) whether there are any systematic relationships between the first two issues and institutional, curricular, and/or student characteristics. Results show that there are strong correlations between the availability of community college honors programs and institutional, curricular, and student body characteristics. Schools in the Mideast seem more likely, and the Southwest less likely, to offer honors programs. The proportion of minority groups seems to affect the likelihood of honors programs, lending credence to those who charge that these programs exclude minority students. Research findings are related to what is already known or suspected about the presence and effects of these programs. Includes seven data tables. (AS)

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Community College Honors Programs: An Overview

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Overview

Although community college honors programs serve an essential function by providing educational challenges for an often overlooked portion of these institutions' student body—the educationally well-prepared—they have received scant attention in the research literature (Bulakowski and Townsend, 1995). In this study, I will attempt to address at least a portion of this significant gap in the literature by investigating the incidence of honors programs within a random, national sample of 163 community colleges. In particular, I will examine relationships between the presence of honors programs and institutional characteristics (e.g., size), curricular characteristic (e.g., emphasis on transfer and remedial courses), and student body characteristics (e.g., the proportion of minority groups). To conclude, I will attempt to relate my research findings to what is already known or suspected about the presence and effect of these programs.

Literature Review

Overall Studies of Honors Programs

The educational literature contains several useful case studies of the effectiveness of honors programs in preparing students for transfer to senior institutions (e. g., Lucas, 1995, Laanan, 1996). In addition, a few larger-scale studies of these programs are available. For example, Byrne (1998) conducted a comprehensive review of the educational literature on honors programs in community colleges, examining 38 honors programs in 19 states and discussing a

wide range of issues relevant to honors programs, including their origins, goals, structure and course offerings.

However, there have been few comprehensive assessments of the incidence and effectiveness of honors programs, with most studies, such as those mentioned above, tending to focus on specific institutions or subsets of community colleges. Cohen and Brawer (1996) note that about 10% of North Central community colleges in a 1975 study offered honors programs, with this number growing to approximately 25% by 1995 (according to Cohen and Brawer's review of *Peterson's Guide to Two-Year Colleges)*. However, the 1975 study was confined to a particular region, and data from the *Peterson's Guide* do not contain readily-accessible information on the relationship of the incidence of honors programs to other community college characteristics.

In short, despite the availability of a few indications of the overall presence of honors programs in community colleges, conclusions on both the incidence and effectiveness of honors programs must remain tentative, because, as Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) state, the majority of honors programs research tends to be single-institution studies demonstrating elements of the success of individual programs, often focusing either on student satisfaction with the program, on the characteristics (especially demographic) of student participants, or on anecdotal evidence of program effectiveness.

Tension between Honors Programs and Community College Access Policies

Despite the lack of strong empirical evidence regarding their availability and effectiveness, honors programs have been criticized for seeming to introduce a

note of elitism into the egalitarian goals of community colleges, with their missions of providing education for everyone (Olivas, 1975). These charges have been exacerbated by limited studies showing that honors program participants are more likely to be white and female than non-honors students. However, the relationship between honors courses and minority student success need not be antagonistic. Some institutions, such as Mississippi's Itawamba Community College, have used supplemental instructional materials and methods in an honors course, including guest speakers and videos, to focus on the experience of cultural and ethnic minorities (Itawamba Community College, 1997). Students in this course reported very high degrees of satisfaction with the class form and content, and stated that their appreciation for pluralism had been enhanced by their experience with the course.

In conclusion, the educational literature would be strengthened by a large-scale investigation of the incidence of honors programs. Findings from this study could form a baseline of knowledge regarding the availability of these programs, which could in turn serve as a context for further large-scale research. In addition, this research could be useful in countering or validating the charges of some critics who hold that honors programs are inherently elitist and antithetical to the longstanding community college principle of open access for all. As I will outline below, I hope to use this study to begin to answer some of these foundational questions regarding honors programs.

Objectives

With this study, I will seek to answer three primary research questions:

1. What proportion of community colleges offer honors programs?
2. How do community colleges structure access to their honors programs?
3. Are there any systematic relationships between the first two questions and institutional, curricular and/or student characteristics?

Method

Sample

Data in this study were gleaned from college catalogs and class schedules solicited from community colleges by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC). In late 1997, CSCC staff invited approximately 950 community colleges to send their most recent catalogs to UCLA for review for its Community College Curriculum Research Project. Of these institutions, 459 responded with usable sets of college catalogs and schedules from the appropriate school term. Of these 459 catalogs, a random sample of 164, stratified by institutional size (as measured by number of students) was used for the Curriculum Project.

While this study is not associated with the Curriculum Project, it has benefited greatly from groundwork laid by staff from that Project. In particular, CSCC staff made available their database, derived from intensive examination of the catalogs. This database contains variables on a) institutional characteristics, such as size, location and type of control; and b) curriculum characteristics, such as

the presence and proportion (relative to the overall curriculum) of various types of courses; and c) student characteristics, such as presence and proportion of students in various ethnic groups (both institutional and student characteristics were drawn from 1996 National Center for Education Statistics data).

For the current study, the author examined each of the 164 catalogs that were used for the Curriculum Project[1]. In reviewing these catalogs, the author sought indications of the presence of honors programs within the institution's curriculum, as well as information regarding honors program admissions criteria.

Analysis

Catalog data on honors programs were coded into a series of dichotomous and continuous variables, then integrated into an SPSS database containing other variables from the CSCC curriculum project. Specifically, catalogs were coded to reflect the presence or absence of:

- Honors programs;
- Strictly academic entrance criteria;
- Non-strictly academic entrance criteria (such as portfolios, interviews, letters of recommendation, etc.).

And, where data were available, entrance criteria to these programs, including:

- Minimum high school and/or community college grade point averages;
- Minimum standardized test scores, including SAT, ACT and region-specific tests.

[1] Because of ambiguities regarding community college catalogs, one institution represented in the Curriculum Project was not included in this study for a the total N of 163, unless otherwise noted.

Limitations

While data from the Curriculum Project form a unique and invaluable source of information on community college honors programs, several limitations must be borne in mind when attempting to generalize the findings described below. Perhaps most disquieting is the small number of community colleges falling into specific categorizations. For example, when assessing the presence of honors programs by region, several classifications contain very few schools, making it difficult to render authoritative statements on all schools in that region based on this dataset. In addition, those data that were available for this study are limited in several important respects. The diversity of community college curricula, to say nothing of the complexities of articulation agreements between community colleges and senior institutions, lead to difficulties in sorting courses into discrete, mutually exclusive categories based on subject area, transferability, etc. Finally, since all information has been taken from community college catalogs, rather than measures of student participation in and/or the effect of these programs, it has been possible to describe only the incidence of honors programs. Investigation of other program characteristics, such as overall enrollment patterns, student success in honors courses, and the outcomes of participation in these programs, has not been possible within the limitations of the data at hand. These limitations will be noted below when they are especially relevant and/or troubling.

Findings

Presence of Honors Programs and Honors Course Admissions Requirements

Table 1 Presence of Honors Programs and Descriptive Information Regarding Entrance Criteria

		Entrance Criteria for Honors Programs					
	Presence of Honors Programs	SAT Score	ACT Score	College GPA	High School GPA	Non-Numeric Criteria*	Non-Academic Criteria**
Number and Percent of Schools	59 (35.8%)	14 (8.6%)	11 (6.8%)	28 (17.2%)	10 (6.1%)	21 (12.9%)	3 (1.8%)
Mean Score and Standard Deviation	NA	1089.69 (97.70)	24.29 (1.68)	3.35 (0.22)	3.29 (0.25)	NA	NA

N=163. *Includes letters of recommendation, essays and interviews. **Includes special appeals, demonstrations of life experience, etc.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data, Catalogs and Class Schedules.

As Table 1 shows, of the 163 institutions studied, 59, or 35.8%, offered honors programs to their students. Of those institutions which did offer honors programs, just over 15% used SAT or ACT scores as an entrance criterion, while almost one-fourth depended on college and/or high school grades for program admission. An additional 12.9% employed non-numerical criteria (interviews, letters and/or essays), while a small minority allowed students to gain access to honors programs through non-strictly academic means, such as special petitions based on life experience. (NB: Entrance criteria are not exclusive: for example, many institutions require minimum high school grades *and* minimum test scores.)

Table 2 **Presence of Honors Programs and Descriptive Information Regarding Entrance Criteria, by Region**

Region***	Presence of Honors Programs (% of Schools in Sample in Region)	Entrance Criteria for Honors Programs: SAT Score (Number Using) Average (SD)	ACT Score (Number Using) Average (SD)	College GPA (Number Using) Average (SD)	High School GPA (Number Using) Average (SD)
New England	3	NA	NA	1	NA
N=8	(37.5%)			3.30	
				(NA)	
Mideast	16	2	1	8	2
N=24	(66.7%)	1100.00	24.00	3.44	3.38
		(141.42)	(NA)	(0.12)	(0.18)
Great Lakes	6	2	2	2	1
N=19	(31.6%)	1185.00	26.00	3.38	3.00
		(49.50)	(1.41)	(0.53)	(NA)
Plains	5	1	1	3	NA
N=19	(26.3%)	1110.00	25.00	3.47	
		(NA)	(1)	(0.06)	
Southeast	7	3	6	6	6
N=38	(18.4%)	1013.33	23.60	3.22	3.32
		(80.83)	(1.14)	(0.19)	(0.28)
Southwest	8	3	3	5	1
N=21	(3.1%)	1115.33	23.67	3.39	3.50
		(127.69)	(3.06)	(0.15)	(NA)
Rocky	1	1	1	1	NA
Mountains	(20.0%)	1110.00	25.00	3.75	
N=5		(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	
Far West	13	1	1	5	1
N=29	(44.8%)	1000.00	25.00	3.15	3.00
		(1)	(NA)	(0.22)	(NA)

N=163. *Includes letters of recommendation, essays and interviews. **Includes special appeals, demonstrations of life experience, etc. ***As defined by the Office of Business Economics.
Note: Small Ns made it impractical to include information on non-numeric and non-academic criteria in this table, with its fine gradations by region.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data, Catalogs and Class Schedules.

As Table 2 shows, significant differences exist among community college programs when these schools are disaggregated by region. Institutions in the Mideast are most likely to offer honors programs, with two-thirds of the schools in

these region offering honors programs. Community colleges in the Southwest are least likely to offer honors programs, with only 3.1% of this region offering these programs. These findings must be viewed with some skepticism, because of the limited number of institutions in the sample in each region. Data on entrance criteria offer less variation by region, perhaps because of the extremely small number of institutions falling into each cell when criteria are separated by type of standard and region.

Relationship between Honors Courses and Institutional, Curricular and Student Body Characteristics

Table 3 Correlations between Presence of Honors Programs and Institutional, Curricular and Student Body Characteristics

Correlations	Presence of Honors Programs
Size of Institution	**23**
Proportion of Transfer Courses	**26**
Proportion of Remedial Courses	-11
Proportion of African-American Students	*-14*
Proportion of Native American Students	-01
Proportion of Asian-American Students	*14*
Proportion of Latina/o Students	**24**

N=158; correlations in **bold** statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level; correlations in *italic* significant at the $p < .10$ level. Decimal points have been omitted.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data and Catalogs.

Table 3 demonstrates that the data reveal statistically significant correlations between the presence of honors programs and institutional, curricular and student body characteristics. Larger schools (i.e., those with more students) are more likely to offer honors programs, as are those with a higher proportion of transfer courses. While schools with a higher proportion of remedial courses are less likely to offer honors programs, this correlation is not statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level. Institutions with more African-American students are less likely to offer honors programs, while those with Latina/o students are more likely to offer these programs.

Relationships between Minority Student Proportions and Honors Programs

Table 4 Cross-Tabulations between Size of Institution and the Presence of Honors Programs

	Size of Institution (as Measured by Number of Students)		
	Low (under 2748)	Medium (2749 to 6141)	Large (over 6142)
Number and Percent of Community Colleges (within that size category) Offering Honors Programs	11 (21.6%)	20 (37.0%)	28 (48.3%)

N=158. *Proportions were divided at points designed to minimize disparity among number of institutions in each category.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data and Catalogs.

Table 4 reveals that the probability that an institution will offer honors programs increases in direct proportion to that institution's size, as measured by number of students. Simply put, the larger an institution, the more likely it is to offer honors programs.

Table 5 **Cross-Tabulations between Proportion of Transfer Courses and the Presence of Honors Programs**

	Proportion of Transfer Courses to All Courses		
	Low (under 40%)	Medium (40-60%)	High (over 60%)
Number and Percent of Community Colleges Offering Honors Programs	3 (8.3%)	30 (43.5%)	26 (44.8%)

N=158. *Proportions were divided at points designed to minimize disparity among number of institutions in each category.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data and Catalogs.

Table 6 **Cross-Tabulations between Proportion of Remedial Courses and the Presence of Honors Programs**

	Proportion of Remedial Courses to All Courses		
	Low (under 3%)	Medium (3-6%)	High (over 6%)
Number and Percent of Community Colleges Offering Honors Programs	16 (44.4%)	20 (38.5%)	22 (31.0%)

N=158. *Proportions were divided at points designed to minimize disparity among number of institutions in each category.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data and Catalogs.

Take together, Tables 5 and 6 show a strong relationship between curricular characteristics and the likelihood of an institution's offering an honors program. If an institution devotes a greater proportion of its curriculum to transfer courses, it is more likely to offer an honors program to its students. Conversely, the likelihood of an honors program falls as the proportion of remedial courses relative to the total curriculum rises. However, these findings must be interpreted with some caution, since the definition of "transfer" course is somewhat open to interpretation.

Table 7 Cross-Tabulations between Proportion of Minority Students and the Presence of Honors Programs

	Number and Percent of Community Colleges (within size category) Offering Honors Programs, by Proportion of Ethnic Group as Percent of Total Student Body		
	Low (0 to 3%)*	Middle (>3 to 40%)	High (>40%)
Ethnic Group			
African-American	25 (43.1%)	32 (34.4%)	2 (16.7%)
Native American	57 (36.3%)	2 (33.3%)	NA
Asian-American	25 (43.1%)	32 (34.4%)	2 (16.7%)
Latina/o	24 (27.3%)	28 (43.1%)	7 (70.0%)

N=158. *Proportions were divided at points designed to minimize disparity among number of institutions in each category.
Source: Center for the Study of Community Colleges Curriculum Research Project Data and Catalogs.

As shown in Table 7, there is a negative relationship between the proportion of African-American students and the availability of an honors program. As the percentage of African-American students at a community college rises, the likelihood of an honors program falls. For example, 43.1% of all institutions in the sample with under 3% African-American enrollment had honors programs, but only 16.7% of those schools with greater than 40% African-American enrollment had honors programs. Interestingly, the likelihood of honors programs increased as the proportion of Asian-American and Latina/o students rose. However, as noted above, the small number of institutions falling into each cell (especially for those cells representing institutions with higher proportions of

minority students) render these findings perhaps interesting but far from authoritative.

Discussion

As the above results show, there are strong correlations between the availability of community college honors programs and institutional, curricular and student body characteristics. As might be expected, those community colleges with more students and a transfer-oriented curriculum are most likely to offer honors programs. In addition, schools in the Mideast region seem more likely to offer these programs, while those in the Southwest appear to be less likely to do so. Disturbingly, the proportion of minority groups seems to effect the likelihood of honors programs as well. The incidence of honors programs falls as the proportion of African Americans rises, lending credence to those who charge that these programs seem to exclude at least some minority students. However, this conclusion must remain tentative pending further investigation of actual enrollment and success in honors programs according to student characteristics, such as ethnicity.

Implications for Future Research

As serious as the above limitations are, they point to promising avenues for future study. If more extensive data were available, one could examine the number of honors courses taken by students (especially as stratified by minority status), performance in these programs, and the predictive power of these programs for transfer to and success in senior institutions. This research could be used to

investigate general community college academic climates and missions, particularly as these climates and missions are related to transfer. In addition, one could examine relationships between these factors and other institutional characteristics, such as the proportion of minority students. Such studies would have a strong bearing on charges that honors programs contribute to elitism and/or enhanced transfer rates.

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